

All Saints Day 2020 Sermon

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

I find it significant that Election Day, the first Tuesday in November, always falls in the shadow of All Saints’ Day, November 1. And I find this juxtaposition of All Saints’ Day and Election Day **especially** meaningful *this* year, when our nation is *so* divided within itself. You see, I believe that our divisions are largely rooted in our over-identification with certain attachments we have to **this** world – especially our attachment to those man-made entities called “Political Parties,” neither of which – Republican or Democratic – even existed before the 19th Century, nor do they exist in any other nation on God’s green earth. So, how could they **possibly** be our *core* identity, our True Self, who we are in God?

And yet, for some of us, I’m afraid, both our principal **individual** identity *and* our principal **group** identity has become that of our partisan political party. **So** strong has party identity become, that for some of us it has even displaced our faith identity – or, even worse, has become *confused* or *conflated* with our faith identity, who we are in Christ.

But All Saints Day holds up for us foundational truths about both our *individual* **and** our *group* identity: corrective truths, I believe, which, once we become re-centered in them, can defuse the high-voltage, pernicious partisanship that has become far too dominant within our nation and in our individual lives.

First, All Saints’ Day, one of our four Major Baptismal Feast Days, proclaims that our **true** individual identity is our **baptismal** identity – who each of us is as a child of God. In our service of Holy Baptism, the priest takes chrism and traces the sign of the cross on the newly-baptized person’s forehead, saying, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Marked as **Christ's** own. Not marked as Republican or Democrat or American or Mexican or white or Black or straight or gay; marked as **Christ's** own, forever. And as we live into who we are as Christ's own, you and I can say, as St. Paul wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Or, as *The Message Bible* so insightfully translates it, "My **ego** is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer *driven* to impress God. Christ lives in me." (unquote) (Gal. 2:20, MSG)

My friends, until this **baptismal** identity, who we are in Christ, becomes our everyday, living, working, and breathing **core** identity, you and I will not be *truly* free. We Americans have somehow gotten into our heads the idea that our "freedom" is expressed through our being able to purchase guns or **not** having to wear masks or being able to pack our mega-churches with as many non-distanced worshipers as we wish. But St. Paul tells us that this is NOT *true* freedom; it is simply **license** to do we want. Again, I quote *The Message* translation: "It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life," St. Paul writes to the Galatians. "Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; **that's** how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. **That's** an act of *true* freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?" (unquote) (Galatians 5:13-15, MSG) Psychologist and author James Finley puts it this way: "Our deepest freedom rests not in our freedom to do what we want to do but rather in our freedom to become who God wills us to be."¹

Our deepest freedom rests not in our freedom to do what we want to do but rather in our freedom to become who God wills us to be.

And that leads to the **second** foundational truth which All Saints' Day teaches us: namely, that no one exists in isolation; for we are all members of one another. "I believe in the communion of saints," we profess in The Apostles' Creed, which is part of the baptismal vows which we will renew shortly. If our *baptismal* identity is our primary **individual** identity, then our primary **group** identity is found in the communion of saints on earth and in heaven. This "blest communion, fellowship divine" (as our hymn put it) far transcends **any** group identity which *this* world invents, including political party identity – *especially* political party identity, since political parties so often function to **divide** the communion of saints. It is because of just such party divisions that St. Paul reprimanded the church in Corinth: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters," Paul wrote, "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ... that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me... that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas'... Has Christ been divided?" (unquote) (1 Corinthians 1:10-13, NRSV)

My friends, the communion of saints must **not** be divided by you or I saying, “I belong to Trump” or “I belong to Biden.” Can we not see, in the shadow of All Saints’ Day, how *sinful* it is to claim our foundational identity in such a fleeting – and divisive – entity as a political party, or to place all our hope in one or another candidate for President of one country among so many others on God’s green and fragile earth?

Election Day always arrives under the Shadow of All Saints’ Day, a day when we are confronted with our **true** identities, both individual and as a community. Each of us is baptized into Christ, and our Christ identity is our **true** individual identity. And each of us is a member of a community which spans earth and heaven, collapses time, and includes all who live, have lived, or will ever live: the communion of saints. These two identities – individual and group – are who we are at our core; our True Self. May we all lean into those true identities this Election Day and beyond.

AMEN

¹ Richard Rohr’s daily devotional, “Freedom to Be Our True Self,” Wednesday, August 16, 2017 <https://cac.org/freedom-to-be-our-true-self-2017-08-16/#:~:text=At%20each%20moment%2C%20we%20exist%20to%20the%20extent,preetermined%2C%20static%20mold%20to%20which%20we%20must%20conform.>

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